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ABSTRACT

A number of classroom strategies are recommended for faculty members who are seeking ideas to help increase student success and reduce attrition in classes. After a discussion of the reasons for increasing concern with retention and attrition, ideas for use in the first few class sessions are presented, with suggestions related to setting a positive tone for the learning environment and clarifying policies and student responsibilities. Instructional tips for success are presented next, such as providing outlines of lecture notes, feedback, positive reinforcement, and study guides; arranging special tutoring sessions and study groups; and maintaining academic standards. Suggestions related to testing are provided next, including such tips as offering thorough explanation of grading procedures, giving early positive reinforcement, assigning mid-term grades, indicating how a student may improve, and discovering if a student is going to drop out so advisement can be offered. Finally, suggestions are listed, related to the use of external resources such as library orientation, team teaching, and visits by other faculty and counselors. (LAL)

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SUGGESTIONS FOR IMPROVING RETENTION IN THE CLASSROOM

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SUGGESTIONS FOR IMPROVING RETENTION IN THE CLASSROOM

by
Steven W. Jones

Both student attrition and retention have been familiar terms used in higher education for decades. Until recently, however, most educators have done little more than acknowledge that the attrition phenomenon exists, accepting it as a natural by-product of the educational experience. In the past, attrition rates have not been a concern except when a specific department has noticed drastic enrollment declines, thus signaling the possibility that some type of problem existed.

Today, however, increased attention is being paid to the problem of attrition, and more educators are becoming aware of the costs of attrition, both to institutions and to students. Students who leave an institution before completing their educational objectives have wasted time, money, and effort. In addition, the negative experience may discourage them from re-enrollment in the future. From the institution's viewpoint, improving retention is one approach to combating declining enrollments and revenue losses that now threaten so many universities and colleges.

Furthermore, improved retention and effective recruitment/marketing are closely related. Students who drop out because they are dissatisfied with their educational experience or feel that the institution misled them during the recruitment phase, will communicate their displeasure to others. This may negatively influence future recruitment/marketing efforts.

Many institutions have reached the point where it has become more cost effective for them to retain currently enrolled students than to replace those who drop out through more aggressive marketing efforts. Most institutions feel that too many students are leaving prematurely and unnecessarily, or because they were not encouraged to develop and pursue further educational objectives. The challenge then is to increase both enrollment and re-enrollment (by increasing student retention rates) without establishing expensive, labor-intensive programs and services.

Faculty and other professional staff members play an extremely significant role in the achievement of this goal. The following suggestions are for faculty members who are seeking ideas to help them increase student success and reduce attrition in their classes.

*Handout from a presentation made for the State University System of Florida at the Florida Student Retention Workshop, June 26-28, 1985.

IDEAS FOR THE FIRST FEW CLASS SESSIONS:

1. Conduct a full instructional period on the first day of classes. This activity sets a positive tone for the learning environment you want to set.
2. List and discuss your course objectives on the first day. Let students know how the course can fit their personal/career goals. Discuss some of the fears and apprehensions that both you and the students have. Tell them what they should expect of you and how you will contribute to their learning.
3. Provide a course outline for each student; include required and optional textbooks, assignments, grading policies, rules, etc.
4. Inform the students (orally and in writing) about your attendance policy. Make them aware of your deep concern for attendance and why it is important to success.
5. Explain clearly student responsibilities for missed classes, exams, late papers, etc.
6. Give your telephone number to students, your office hours, and the location of your office. Provide a small note pad on your office door so students can leave messages if you are not in.
7. During the first class meeting, pair up the students and have them get acquainted with one another. Switch partners every five (5) minutes. Faculty should participate. Encourage students to identify "commonalities" with other class members.
8. Have the students establish a "buddy" system for absences, work missed, assignments, tutoring, etc.
9. During the crucial first class sessions:
 - A. Stress a positive "you can handle it" attitude.
 - B. Emphasize your willingness to give individual help with course content.
 - C. Utilize a variety of instructional methods.
 - D. Urge students to talk to you about problems and changes in work schedule before dropping your course.
10. Have students fill out an index card with name, address, telephone number, goals, and other personal information that you or they think is important. Ask them to provide a list of the times they are available to meet with you.

INSTRUCTIONAL TIPS FOR SUCCESS

1. Get to class before students arrive; be the last person to leave the room. Meet all of your classes as scheduled. Deviations from the printed schedule cause severe problems for many students.
2. Distribute an outline of your lecture notes before class starts. This approach assists students in organizing the material you are presenting and impels you to present your material in an orderly manner.
3. Throughout the semester have students submit topics that they would like to cover or discuss related to the subject matter.
4. Provide positive reinforcement whenever possible; give students a respectful answer to any question they might ask.
5. Circulate around the class as you talk or ask questions. This movement creates a physical closeness to the students. Avoid standing behind the lectern or sitting behind the desk for the entire period. Maintain good eye contact with students; this is extremely important both in and out of class.
6. At the end of each class period, ask one student to stay for a minute to chat (compliment him/her on something; tell the student you missed him/her if recently absent, etc.)
7. Hold administrators, division chairpersons, and program coordinators responsible for the quality of instruction provided by part-time faculty. Insist on the same standards that are applied to full-time faculty.
8. Call students on the telephone if they are absent twice in a row. Make an appointment with them to discuss attendance, make-up work, problems, etc.
9. Socialize with students as your "style" permits by attending their club or social activities, by walking with them between classes, etc.
10. Get feedback periodically from students on their perceptions of your attitudes toward them, your personal involvement, teaching style, and effectiveness.
11. Set up special tutoring sessions and extra classes. Make these activities mandatory, especially for students who are doing poorly.

12. Place study guides and lecture notes in a file in the library and/or study skills center.
13. Listen intently to student comments and opinions. Use a "lateral thinking technique" (adding to ideas rather than dismissing them) so that students feel their ideas, comments, and opinions are worthwhile. This approach permits you to consider all viewpoints.
14. Help students feel free to ask questions. When you answer a student's question, be sure he/she understands your answer. Make the student repeat the answer in his/her own words.
15. Refer untimely withdrawals to counseling for follow-up. Request a written or verbal report from counseling.
16. Encourage study groups (a form of peer tutoring). Emphasize the fact that students are not competing with one another, but that they can learn from one another.
17. Take the initiative to contact and meet with students who are doing poor work. Be especially cognizant of the "passive" student, one who comes to class, sits quietly, does not participate, but does poorly on tests, quizzes, etc.
18. Maintain academic standards; be sure students understand this. Retention is not based on grade inflation; attrition often is.

TESTING FOR RETENTION (both academic and student):

1. Explain thoroughly (orally and in writing) your grading methods and procedures.
2. Provide some means to establish quick positive reinforcement to students within the first few class periods.
3. Devise the first test of the semester to cover a small unit -- fewer topics to study, fewer test questions, etc. If the subject matter is appropriate, use a pre-test to determine knowledge, background, abilities prior to lectures.
4. Instead of returning tests, quizzes, themes in class, ask students to stop by your office to pick them up. This also presents an opportunity to talk informally with students and for them to determine the location of your office.
5. Give each student a mid-term grade and indicate what each student must do to improve; a mid-term conference may be needed.

6. At mid-term and at final exam, your last test question should ask if a student is going to remain in college or drop out at the end of the semester. If a potential drop-out is identified, you can advise the student personally and/or work with a divisional counselor (preferably both).
7. Use the library reference shelf for some of your old tests and quizzes. Tell the students that you will use some questions from the old exams in their next test.

USING EXTERNAL RESOURCES:

1. If you require a term paper or research paper, you should take the responsibility of arranging a library orientation.
2. Take students on a mini-tour of the learning resources center, reading/study skills area, natural science learning lab, counseling center, etc. If a particular student needs reading/study skills help, don't just send him/her. TAKE HIM/HER! Students often get lost in the "referral shuffle".
3. Encourage students to attend cultural activities and to participate in extra-curricular activities. Give recognition and/or rewards for meaningful participation.
4. Utilize the skills of other faculty members as guest lecturers and discussion leaders.
5. Team teach a class with a colleague or switch classes for a period or two. Invite a guest lecturer to class. The students would welcome an occasional switch as much as you would!
6. Ask the reading faculty to do a "readability study" of the texts you use in your courses.
7. Encourage your institution to teach a freshmen orientation course for all new, full-time students. Several outstanding models are available to follow.
8. Have the counselors visit your classes to foster awareness of counseling and placement services.
9. Encourage students to report their experiences if they have used support services such as study skills, counseling, placement, etc.
10. Provide students with a list of class names, addresses, and telephone numbers (with permission) to encourage

out-of-class contacts. (see FIRST CLASS session #10).

11. Work with your divisional counselor to discuss procedures to follow-up absentees, failing students, etc.
12. Ask an administrator to participate in a classroom panel discussion or to guest lecture. Use administrators as advisors of freshmen.
13. Encourage administrators to teach classes or to substitute in classes when a faculty member attends a professional meeting. Administrators need to stay in closer touch with the "life blood" of the institution.